

Practice guide 8

Key sources of corporate and partner information



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This is one of a series of practice guides produced by the Centre for Public Scrutiny to assist those working in the overview and scrutiny functions of local authorities.

What is this guide about?

This guide is about the different sources of information which scrutiny can use to carry out its work. It provides a guide to the principal documents which, between them, should give scrutiny councillors the confidence to know that they are getting an accurate and timely picture of the performance of the council and its partners. It also provides some guidance about how this evidence might be triangulated (ie, how you can look at multiple sources of evidence together to show you the full story).

The list is not exclusive, and many documents will have different names in different authorities.

Why is it important to be aware of, and understand, key sources of corporate information?

In some authorities, scrutiny councillors rely overwhelmingly on officer reports for information about services and issues affecting local people. Such reports, prepared on request, are a useful tool in understanding a service, but can only ever present a limited view which will go out of date quickly. The preparation of such reports is also, of course, resource intensive.

If members can access the source material used to prepare these reports – internal management reports and other data produced by partners – they can use their own judgment to use this information in a number of ways:

- Whether there is a justification for scrutinising an issue in the first place;
- When a decision has been made to carry out a scrutiny review, to better define its scope;
- To contribute towards the general evidence gathering exercise that forms the heart of a scrutiny review;
- To ensure that recommendations, when they are made, accurately reflect work already being carried out by the council and its partners.

While there is a strong case for arguing that members' access to key information could be improved, this does not mean that scrutiny will automatically improve as a result. Members must have the confidence and skills to be able to use information to drive the scrutiny process. We discuss this in more detail below when we talk about "triangulation" of evidence.

What key documents should members have access to?

Performance, finance and risk

- Quarterly performance reports. Departments of the council and their partners will normally produce quarterly scorecards and reports which will provide you with a snapshot of current performance;
- Quarterly finance figures. These will explain how the council is spending according to projections, and will give a good idea of unexpected expenditure, and issues which may lead to overspends and underspends at the end of the year. We provide more information on monitoring of budgets in our publication “**On the money**” (2013), <http://ow.ly/wPJog>;
- Programme and project management information. The council will probably have a corporate work programme, often called a “corporate plan” or similar, which members can look at to establish whether major strategies and policies are being implemented on time;
- Risk registers. The council should have a clear idea of what the risks are in the implementation of major policies, and in the ordinary day-to-day delivery of services. Analysis of risk registers on an ongoing basis will mean that scrutiny can understand what the impacts might be if risks are likely to occur, and what steps can be taken to mitigate. Scrutiny’s input might assist with this mitigation, and with providing a more rounded evidence base on which risk registers can rely. Examples of risk registers and their use in local government can be found at <http://ow.ly/wPJJY> (internal guidance provided for officers at **Bedfordshire** council) and <http://ow.ly/wPKzV> (**Birmingham’s** corporate risk management strategy).
- Complaints digests/information. Looking at complaints against the council in general (ie, not analysing specific, individual complaints, but looking at major themes and issues) may give a good idea about where problems might lie, and could act as the basis for more detailed scrutiny work (some councils, such as **Gedling** (<http://ow.ly/wPKPZ>), have carried out reviews specifically looking at complaints data).
- Internal reviews and action plans. From time to time the authority will identify problems or issues with its own services. This may be as a result of internal reviews – either carried out by the council’s own officers or by external consultants – and may result in operational action plans to bring about improvements. There is a case to be made for scrutiny to be involved in this process, and certainly for scrutiny to have access to relevant documentation.

Strategic information

- The budget and policy framework. The framework is signed off annually by Full Council and provides the basis on which all council decisions are made;
 - External inspection reports. When council services are subject to inspection by Ofsted, Estyn, CQC, the WAO or others;
 - Corporate peer challenge letters, reports and information. In England, the LGA manages a system of peer challenge which concludes with a letter being sent to the Leader and Chief Executive setting out areas where the council might need to make improvements (as well as areas of high performance);
 - Departmental plans and strategies. Council departments will have three or five year plans, which they will use to direct how they deliver services. These should be based on background evidence, which you should also be able to access;
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- Partnership plans and strategies. Partnerships – like Community Safety Partnerships and Local Enterprise Partnership will have plans and strategies to direct their work. There should be background evidence for these documents too;
 - Council or partnership programmes. Sitting beneath strategic plans, departmental (or corporate) programmes will monitor how individual projects are being implemented. Looking at the programme can provide a useful way to compare plans against delivery, in the context of performance information (see above);
 - Cross-departmental strategies. The council and its partners will have strategies – such as those relating to equalities, or social value – which will cut across all services;
 - Improvement plans. The council is likely to have improvement plans in place for services where performance is a cause for concern;
 - Information from benchmarking clubs. Many councils voluntarily share performance information with others to help with improvement and mutual learning. Many also share information more widely using the LG Inform system (<http://lginform.local.gov.uk/>).

Other information

Less formal, but no less useful, forms of information are available corporately which will help you to do your work.

- Feedback from consultations / residents panels. The council will periodically consult with local people on major decisions; the council may also organise a residents' panel, which it will survey for their opinions on key local issues;
- Feedback from frontline staff. There will be formal, or informal, ways for middle and senior managers to get feedback from frontline staff about the service they deliver. Getting hold of this information can be valuable for scrutiny.

There are other evidence sources not listed here.

How should members have access to this information?

More councils (such as **Doncaster**) are giving their councillors direct access to management information such as the above. Some of this is available in online management information systems, updated in real time by officers. The benefit that this brings is that it allows members to look at raw data, making their own links between performance issues, and identifying connections (based on their unique perspective as elected representatives, and given the detailed knowledge they will have of their wards) which officers may have missed. However, this relies on members having the confidence and skills to access and use this information, and also on ways in which to feed members' views through the scrutiny process itself. We discuss this challenge in more depth in "**Green Light**" (2010).

Allowing members access to the same management information as senior officers means that they can independently decide which issues they think are sufficiently important to raise at scrutiny. An approach based exclusively on officer reports in effect makes this judgment one for officers alone.

Taking evidence to committee

Officer reports containing information of the type mentioned above might be taken to committee under councils' existing arrangements, but there is little value in taking management information, or other corporate data, there as a matter of course. There are several reasons for this:

- Such information would only ever be presented for information or for noting, making outcomes of such an exercise difficult to discern;
- Presenting information in committee reduces its value as evidence that influences other scrutiny work, instead encouraging members to look at it as a standalone issue, unconnected to other issues of local importance;
- Such activity would be resource intensive.

Instead, it is more useful to think of these various different kinds of corporate evidence sources as background information, to which scrutiny members have regular access, and which they can use to drive and inform their wider work.

How can members triangulate this evidence with other sources?

Using evidence effectively means triangulating it. This means looking at it alongside other sources of data, to see what themes emerge (and whether different evidence sources disagree about services being provided on the ground).

For example, you might triangulate customer complaints data with performance information, finance information and risk registers, to take a comprehensive view of the performance of a given service. While performance information may suggest that all targets are being met, the service may be overspending and complaints data may demonstrate that the public are unhappy with the level of service being provided; an issue which has not been identified in the risk register as needing action. Linking together information in this way allows judgments to be made about difficulties which can help to frame and focus solutions in a way that will be useful to officers delivering the service on the ground.

Triangulating evidence in this way is not a complex science but there are a number of issues to consider in doing so:

- How different sources of evidence will be weighed – not all evidence and information is of equal value;
 - How much evidence is needed in order to come up with an accurate picture. There may be a tendency to seek out more and more information in order to establish the most “comprehensive” picture possible, but this may be resource intensive and add little to the evidence gathering process. Officers and members should discuss between them the most appropriate balance.
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